two lives down and one life left

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by wastrelwoods

Summary

Peter Nureyev comes to Mars for a job, and meets a dancer with an award-winning smile who seems to be the only person who can lead him to the item he's been hired to reclaim. Complications quickly arise, and Peter finds himself temporarily engaged to a man in a coma whilst embroiled in a conspiracy for control of Hyperion City. Then he meets his fiance's twin brother, and things go spectacularly pear-shaped.

Notes

MINIBANG TIME!!! I had this idea in mind but I knew I needed the motivation of an organized fandom event to actually follow through with it so THANKS to the mods for keeping this ship afloat!

also thanks to these wonderful artists for all their stunning work
Charles: @tin.pear on insta
Rey: @nottodaylogic on tumblr
Sam: @spicybruha on twitter and tumblr

Updates are coming daily!

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

> It’s difficult to deny Hyperion City is every inch as beautiful as it looks on all the postcards.

Chapter Notes

> EDIT: told myself I was gonna add chapter notes/warnings as I posted but got too excited and forgot oops!
>
> Overall canon-typical violence warning because although this is a rom-com it is in Hyperion City! Also pretty hard to avoid are depictions of injury and hospitalization so if that's touchy for you, maybe wait until the NEXT time I try to adapt a rom-com with less of that happening. Thanks and comment to your heart's content, your author needs them for sustenance

Stepping off the cruiser, Peter Nureyev allows himself to indulge in a moment of sentimentality. It’s difficult to deny Hyperion City is every inch as beautiful as it looks on all the postcards. The pearly glow of the dome forms a perfect arc against the horizon, tall starscrapers of neon and chrome rising up into the sky like fingers grasping for the sun. Other buildings hovering over those, floating mansions suspended like jewels in a necklace.

The City of First Light. He takes a moment to fix the image of the skyline in his mind, and gently folds it away in his memory to examine again at a more convenient moment. There is, as always, work to be done.

The paperwork goes through as seamlessly as ever. He’d been concerned, the additional risk of outsourcing it through his employer’s contact, but the businesses which come with a paycheck this size are always hampered by conditions, stipulations, constraints. And, he thinks it is safe to assume, a little more oversight than he is accustomed to working with. But needs must, Nureyev allows, glancing sidelong at the cameras hanging over the stage door.

He’s passed between a few stagehands before reaching the general manager’s office, and takes note of the twisting, turning passageways throughout the depths of the theater. A thousand places to disappear. A thief’s paradise. Nureyev knocks politely, and pastes on the

appropriately prepared smile.

“Argent?”

The man behind the desk is short and stocky, clearly the type to have inherited the company by chance rather than dancing himself ragged and settling down into a desk job to wait out retirement. He looks stodgily at Nureyev over his half-moon glasses.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Sterling. Very grateful for the opportunity, of course, only give me time to warm up and a place to set down my things and I’ll be happy to start off right away with the rest of my audition--”

“Save it,” he dismisses. “No time for all that business, you’re in. Sign everywhere it’s marked on that--” he hands over a clunky tablet model-- “and get yourself in for measurements before Wardrobe guts me in my sleep.”

“O-oh.” Nureyev feigns amazement. “Well, that is unexpected. I...thank you?”

“Don’t take it personally, kid, but I’m not in a position to turn you down today, alright? Need all the dancers we can get. Just don’t cause trouble, yeah?”

Nureyev forges his name half a dozen times in succession, learning the rhythm of the new one in the bones of his hand, adding a flourish where it seems appropriate. He’d be more practiced already if he’d been allowed to falsify his own passport and identification, but he’s a quick study when the need arises. “I understand completely,” he demurs. “A corpse in the corps de ballet must be quite the source of stress for you, mm?”

Sterling glowers up at him with an air of not quite having followed the joke. “Sure.”

Nureyev blinks, and lets the naive smile on his lips falter. He hands the tablet back over the desk. “I’ll...be on my way then.”

So the work begins. Official company member or no, he’s reticent to make a beeline for the first location on his list in broad daylight, especially with police and private investigators and press busily milling around the place. Time for that later. For now, a slightly harried tour of the dressing rooms and dance studios and shops and storerooms, and a dozen more vacant, friendly smiles exchanged with

people too busy to pay him any real mind. The stage manager who had been escorting him wanders off abruptly two thirds of the way through a discussion of the week's rehearsal schedule, distracted by some other important query, and Nureyev makes his excuses, slipping away to the second location on his list.

The mayor's private box is meant to be locked at all hours except for the half hour before performances, and security on this particular seat is a little higher than most for a fair few reasons. But at the moment, the door hangs casually ajar. Nureyev raps sharply on the gilt frame before he slips inside, discreetly as he can without taking anyone utterly by surprise.

One of the trio of seats inside is occupied. The shadows mask most of their face but for the garish teal color painting their lips, but it's more for style and show than a real attempt at anonymity. Nureyev takes the furthest seat after a moment's consideration.

"You're early," Mayor Pereyra says, flashing tombstone white teeth his way. There's a lit cigarette dangling from the corner of their mouth, trailing smoke. "Can't teach punctuality, I've always said. Do you have a natural talent, buddy, or did you just want the extra time to snoop around?"

"Pure coincidence, I'm afraid," Nureyev says coolly. "A little mix-up with the flight plans. I trust it won't be a problem?"

Pereyra laughs. It's a charming laugh, and for a great many people it's been the last sound they've ever heard. They kick out one foot, showing off a daggerpoint stiletto heel. "Not to my knowledge. I got you your in, after all, didn't I? Up to you how long it takes you to follow through on your end, find what I brought you here to find. I'm in no rush."

"Splendid," Nureyev begins, but they aren't done.

"Some of my friends, though, they can be...impatient. And losing track of the goods once, that was a setback that put a lot of people on edge." They draw their face out of the shadow to meet Nureyev's eyes, pointedly, blinking slow like a cat on the prowl, and take a drag on the cigarette. "Just keep it in mind."

Nureyev permits himself a moment to feel the way his pulse jackrabbits and his palms go clammy, and then files the sensations away. "Of course."

Pereyra grins. “Good man.”

He hesitates just an instant before deciding it’s better to air the grievance than not. “I mentioned in our earlier correspondence that I rarely deal in missing persons cases….”

The mayor hums. “Ms. Maurya? Pal, call me heartless, but I don’t really care where our dear departed prima ballerina ended up, dead or alive. People can be replaced. What I care about is the package she was scheduled to hand off to me. I care about where that disappeared to very much, and I’m anxious to get it back. That clear things up for you?”

“Exponentially,” Nureyev breathes, a little relieved. “And this package is--”

“That’s need to know, friend,” Pereyra says, taking another long drag of their cigarette. “If you need to know, I’ll tell you, but I’ve got confidence in our partnership. I think you can manage without it for a while.”

Nureyev purses his lips, silent, and drums his fingers against his knee. “Ah.”

“Your best bet is gonna be the shoes,” they clarify, with a smile in their voice and smoke on their lips. “Custom made. I donated them to Maurya back when she landed her position here with the Hyperion Ballet. It’s amazing, really, what you can smuggle into a costume if you try.”

“I see.”

Nureyev unfolds from his chair, turning away while Pereyra stubs their cigarette to ash against the simwood armrest. “Go on,” they say, a clear dismissal and a hint of a threat all in one. “Thrill me. I’ll keep in touch.”

Elizabeth Maurya’s former dressing room is, for the moment, sealed off with enough red tape that slipping inside would require a police uniform at the very minimum, and so Nureyev adds another layer of disguise over the top of his newly acquired alias. But a thorough scavenging of the room turns up not one single pair of pointe shoes.

An expected disappointment, but a disappointment nonetheless, and a waste of an afternoon.

For want of another option, he blends in.

There had been research, for this job. Extensive, exhausting research, of the kind it's becoming increasingly difficult to train his body into, year by year. Nureyev tries not to furrow his brow as he sways at the barre, dropping into a *plie* and glancing sidelong at his own reflection as he tries to call forth the pattern of a *tendu* warmup from memory and look as though the movements are second nature.

"You should turn out more," someone says, over his shoulder, and Nureyev doesn't startle so much as suffer a temporary waver in his balance. He blinks, put out.

"Ah."

"Like this," the newcomer demonstrates, reaching out to reposition Nureyev's bent leg at a slightly different angle. "And point your toe. It makes a smoother line."

Nureyev bites his lip, and follows the advice. The other dancer's tone is unexpectedly cordial, for all his intrusion is unwelcome. He steps into view, circling around Nureyev to watch him bring his feet back to first position. A soft, flickering smile and a pair of piercing eyes in a dark, handsome face. Strong shoulders, toned thighs, gentle hands over his own on the barre.

[image]

Looking at him, Nureyev feels his lungs seize for half an instant, and he freezes mid-step. The other dancer looks back at him, blinks, and laughs. "Sorry, sorry. Didn't meant to sneak up on you!"

He makes for a very handsome distraction, all told. Nureyev clears his throat. "Not at all! I only--didn't know there was anyone else practicing in here."

The dancer's smile grows until it's almost too bright to look at directly. "You must be the new understudy."

Nureyev reminds himself to breathe, and sweeps into a small bow. "Robin," he stammers. "Argent."

"Robin," the dancer echoes. "Cool. I'm Benzaiten." He reaches a hand

out, and Peter shakes it readily. Strong hands. Steady. He takes his place at the barre beside Nureyev and bends into a graceful stretch, arm curving over his head. “This alright?”

Nureyev doesn’t let his eyes flicker down to the flexing tendons of his calf. “By all means,” he demurs. One job in a dozen allows for a brief dalliance with a handsome man, if the fancy should happen to strike him, and this job is not one. There are a hundred different cogs in motion, keeping the machinery of Hyperion City on its ceaseless slow grind, and the last thing he has time for is to start improvising now.

Still, he thinks, arching one foot out in a *ronde de jambe*, it’s a pity.

But Benzaiten is persistent in his overtures of friendship, striking up casual conversation about rehearsals, about the petty politics of the corps de ballet, about any little thing that seems to strike his fancy. “First time on Mars?” he asks, jovial. “I was born and raised here. Never even left Hyperion.”

Robin Argent is from Io, a slightly starry-eyed career chorus dancer who’s spent the last decade flitting between star systems and companies without ever making much of an impression. Not so much a diamond in the rough as a passably shiny bit of polished glass. Ambitious, as any performer might be, but not overly so. His family history has never been properly fleshed out, but one vague enough answer to the negative and Benzaiten seems content to leave the topic be. Adamant, even, enough to pique Nureyev’s own curiosity. Still, business first.

“I was wondering--” he begins. “Only, nobody has been very forthcoming on the subject thus far.”

Benzaiten makes a vague noise of agreement, rising from a *grand plie*.

“Ms...Maurya,” Nureyev says, hesitantly. “What...happened to her? Was she...well liked?”

The dancer snorts. “Every prima ballerina has enemies.”

“Of course,” Nureyev concedes. “It’s just that I heard a rumor of...perhaps...organized crime?”

Benzaiten raises an eyebrow. “It’s possible. Happens a lot in Hyperion City.” He cocks a grin. “I know a pretty good P.I., if you want the answers that badly--”

“No, no,” he assures. “I just wanted to be sure there’s nothing more...I don’t know, sinister? Behind my being hired so quickly? Call it intuition. Or paranoia, maybe.”

There’s a considerate pause, and Benzaiten relaxes, leaning against the barre with a deliberate false-casual air. “You sound like Ilse.”

Nureyev stills. “Ilse?”

“Elizabeth. Maurya, whatever.” He pushes the dark curls off his forehead with one hand, and leans in a little closer, dropping his voice low. “She talked a lot about her hunches, funny feelings, premonitions of danger, all of that. I didn’t pay her any mind. Dancers are paranoid, you know? And principals especially, they’re right to worry, because there really are plenty of people out to get them. But last week…” Benzaiten furrows his brow. “I mean, I’m pretty sure she knew exactly how much danger she was in right before she disappeared.”

Nureyev listens with bated breath. Perhaps not just a pretty distraction after all. Perhaps Benzaiten might be a very helpful resource, if employed properly. “Oh?”

“Yeah, probably pissed off the wrong people and knew it was coming back to bite her. She didn’t say who, though, just started squirreling away all her stuff, like--” He clears his throat, and abruptly walks away, fishing a water bottle out of his bag and taking a swig. “Anyway, if you haven’t gotten on anyone’s bad side yet, Robin, I think you’re safe.”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Nureyev prevaricates, and Benzaiten laughs.

“Nah, it’s fine, just. We probably shouldn’t talk about it here.” He gestures vaguely around the empty studio. “Active investigation, and all that.”

A flash of giddiness at the sheer dumb luck of stumbling into the source of the information he needs so quickly makes Nureyev’s head spin. He wets his lips with his tongue, and files the feeling away. “In that case,” he offers, slowly. “I don’t suppose you’re free tonight?”

“Champagne?” Nureyev asks, when the waiter returns with a bottle.

“Why the hell not? Got the day off tomorrow! It’s my birthday,” Benzaiten says with a smile that quickly sharpens and shines like pyrite. “And my brother’s.”

“Well,” Nureyev clears his throat and unstoppers the cork. “Happy birthday, I suppose.” He doesn’t know what the sharp veneer of that painted-on grin means. More and more it seems that Benzaiten Steel only appears to be an open book. He pours the champagne with a cautious cheer, and slides one flute across the table.

Benzaiten takes it almost as an afterthought, but his eyes are distant. “Yeah,” he agrees, nearly takes a sip and hesitates, some thought sticking in his throat and choking the impulse. “I actually, uh. Was hoping to see him, you know, but the dumbass stopped returning my calls.” He barks out a tiny, bitter laugh, and swigs the champagne.

Peter Nureyev doesn’t have a brother. Neither does Robin Argent. The subject of family is one of the few that remains, to him, quite unparseable even after years of careful research and observation. He sips at his own flute, politely and silently.

“We used to get into so much trouble together,” Benzaiten says, some of his false cheer melting away while he picks at one of the rolls on his plate. “Mostly my fault, really,” he admits. “I’d get us into it and he’d have to be the one to get us back out again, except he’d always try to take the fall for me. Stubborn bastard.”

Nureyev leans forward, elbow resting on the table and chin resting on his hand. “That sounds like a fascinating story.”

He looks up from his torn-apart roll and blinks. “Nah, not as much as you’d think.” Benzaiten grins. “Pretty predictable, actually. I dug myself a hole that was a little too deep, and I guess he finally got sick of having to pull me out all the time.” He raises his glass with another burst of false cheer, and throws the rest of it back. “Not all bad, though. I’ve had a lot more time to myself the last decade and change.”

There’s something for the first time in his false-cheery tone that strikes Peter Nureyev as familiar. A note of wistfulness, perhaps, or something equally maudlin which he takes into consideration and determines to file away for the present moment. He tightens his fingers on the stem of the champagne flute, and offers the dancer a small, tight smile. “More fool he.”

Benzaiten leans back in his chair. “Yeah?”

Nureyev glances away, face heating, and meets his eyes again. “I think I’d relish a chance to get into trouble with you.”

[image]

That earns him a laugh, and a wink as Benzaiten reaches back across the table for the bottle and tops up his champagne. “You’re cute, Robin.” He pops one piece of the shredded roll into his mouth. “Did you actually bring me here to ask questions about our missing ballerina, or did you go to all this trouble just to flirt?”

“No trouble,” Nureyev demurs. Somewhere in the back of his mind it occurs to him that one of the guests a few tables over has glanced their way five times in the last ten minutes, with too much regularity to pass for coincidence. He shifts a little higher in his chair. “What can I say? It’s my first night in Hyperion City, and I had a notion you might be the right man to ask for the grand tour.”

Benzaiten’s nose wrinkles. “Corny.”

“Oh, all right then,” he sighs, chin falling into his hand again. “Tell me about Ilse Maurya.”

There’s a waiter visibly lurking behind another table near the windows, her apron slightly askew and her heavy boots giving away the secondhand nature of her borrowed uniform. No waiter wears work boots in an establishment like this. Nureyev blinks and shifts his weight until he can feel the comfortable pressure of the plasma knife tucked into the back of his waistband.

Benzaiten laughs. “You’re so persistent. What makes you think I know anything about her?”

“Maybe you don’t,” he admits. “But you spoke about her with such confidence before, I just assumed--”

It might be nothing to worry about, only a pair of the mayor’s people keeping an eye on the new hire. But it strikes Nureyev that Mx. Pereyra would seek out a subtler class of goon for a stakeout.

Across the table, Benzaiten’s piercing eyes flicker to his, and narrow. “Something wrong?”

Nureyev looks down at the champagne flute in his hand, still mostly untouched, and feels his vision tunnel for an instant as a wave of dizziness washes over him. He curses under his breath.

Still, being haphazardly ambushed and drugged would seem to indicate he is definitely on the right track, which is a promising realization. “It seems we might get our chance to get into trouble together, after all,” he remarks, cheerily.

The dancer’s eyes widen incrementally before rolling back in his head. Nureyev lunges forward across the table as Benzaiten slumps sideways in his chair, convulsing slightly and pulling at the tablecloth as he falls. The restaurant around him is tilting wildly but remaining more or less in focus, and Nureyev grits his teeth, willing himself to stay conscious.

The poisoning was amateurishly done. A public spectacle of this kind? They could never hope to isolate the pair of them well enough, not unless the whole restaurant was in on the job, and Nureyev very much doubts this goes so far. He clutches at Benzaiten’s shoulders and guides him to collapse gently to the floor, watching the suspicious waiter and patron scurry out of sight one after the other. Head swimming, Nureyev braces himself against the table, and considers his options.

It’s a perfect distraction. With all eyes on the unconscious man, it would be the work of an instant to disappear. To observe where the pieces fall from a comfortable distance, locate the package, and slip in to retrieve it when the moment is right.

But of course, there’s no knowing how long it might be before that opportune moment arrives. And by abandoning Benzaiten Steel to the same fate that met Ilse Maurya, he would risk losing his only lead. More time wasted, the frustration of having to start again from scratch. A frankly unacceptable setback.

Nureyev feels his pulse flutter rapidly in his throat, and makes his choice.

It’s a matter of practicality more than anything that causes him to steal a hand into his back pocket and retrieve one of the several trinkets that had slipped into it over the course of the day. A carefully calculated impulse of common-sense that makes him slip the diamond ring onto Benzaiten’s unresisting finger, and sit upright with a gasp, and call out, “Help! Someone, please--my fiancé--he’s not well!”

A concerned murmur susurrates through the other patrons around them, at least one woman already calling for an ambulance, and Nureyev shifts Benzaiten’s lolling head to rest in his lap, feeling

lightheaded in a way he is determined to blame entirely on the drugged champagne.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> In a darkened waiting room of Hyperion General in the dead of night, the persona of Robin Argent receives a few expeditious edits.

Chapter Notes

> No warnings specific to this chapter SO I can just take a moment to plug that if you read Richard Siken's *You Are Jeff* you will experience several of the emotions I did while writing this whole fic. Despicably on brand, I know, but like--Consider the hairpin turn!

In a darkened waiting room of Hyperion General in the dead of night, the persona of Robin Argent receives a few expeditious edits. A few months' further history on Mars, several consecutive appearances on the attendance roster of the weekly dance lessons overseen by Benzaiten Steel of the Hyperion Ballet corps to corroborate the history of a whirlwind romance, a copy of an apartment keycard fished from his wallet, a ring to match the one he'd found in his pocket an hour before.

Nureyev himself swallows a charcoal tablet from a small tin in the breast pocket of his jacket to flush out the toxin-laced champagne, and procures a copy of his new beau's medical file, and peruses it twice over before the nurse returns.

When he does, face somber and worn, he leads Nureyev through the antiseptic-smelling hallways in a bit of a daze, sits him gently down in another uncomfortable chair in a stuffy white-washed room full of softly beeping machinery to offer a terse treatise on *weakened synaptic function* and *complications from interactions with cybernetics*. Nureyev listens patiently, and nods gravely at the appropriate intervals.

How a man ought to properly react to the news that his fiance is in a coma is a dilemma Nureyev has never yet come across in his long and notable career. For himself, it's both a relief and a frustration, a warning of how close he came to losing his only lead, and a troubling complication to an already complicated job. But Robin, he decides, is a romantic. The kind to frown and reach for his lover's motionless hand where it rests against the scratchy hospital linens, to ask,

trembling, “Will he be alright?” without looking up at the nurse again. “How long will he be...like this?”

“These things take time,” the nurse says placidly. “Can’t rush healing. A few days, probably, but I can’t make any promises. Could be weeks.” He makes a few markings on a chart, glances back at Nureyev again, and tuts. “You gonna be okay there, honey?”

Nureyev looks down at the strange new glint of the engagement ring on his finger, and wonders for a long, dazed moment what exactly he’s managed to get himself into. “I’m fine,” he lies. “Perfectly alright, thank you.”

“Sure,” the nurse demurs. “Well, don’t lose track of time, alright? Visiting hours are ending soon, you know we start charging double if you’re loitering around after that.” He doesn’t wait for a response before taking his leave, but Nureyev isn’t particularly compelled to offer him any.

Benzaiten’s face is strangely unrecognizable in stillness, slack and pallid and crisscrossed with tubes and wires. Nureyev extricates his hand and sits back in the chair, considering.

As a man who makes a living trading in dangerous secrets, the small contradictions in Benzaiten Steel’s frank and open nature intrigue him. A dozen old wounds, faded almost to invisibility, broken-bottle scars and cigarette burns and scraped knees. The glimpse of silver and simskin at the nape of his neck that marks the only visible element of a sophisticated cybernetic spine brace. The jagged, puckering scar of a laser burn between two of his ribs, just south of his heart. A very lucky man, or a very unlucky one: Nureyev supposes only time will tell which.

And now, the secret he seems not even to know that he knows: Where Ilse Maurya left her package after failing to deliver it. Where she disappeared to after that. And perhaps more than that, what precisely it is Nureyev’s employer wants with that little item he’s been hired to retrieve.

If there were some expeditious way to pry the knowledge from his head, some magical mind-reading pill one might swallow, that would be something. As it is, Nureyev finds himself rather at a loss.

He stands and turns toward the door just in time to watch it fly open, sliding ajar so quickly that he can hear the mechanism whine in protest. The wall of noise hits him even faster, two voices overlapping

in a slightly frantic cacophony.

“--not my fault! I had my comms on me, okay, it’s just that it’s been acting kinda weird since I ran it through the wash inside my pants last week, keeps dropping all my calls. I keep meaning to get it fixed, but--”

“Sure thing, Missus Sasha, I’m checkin’ in on him right now and I’ll call right back and tell you *everything* just as soon as I--no, Mistah Steel said he’d come by later, he’s in the middle of a case--well you don’t hafta use *that* kind of language with me, I know he’s being stubborn, but--I gotta call you back, Missus Sasha! Bye now!”

“Quietly, please,” comes the strained voice of the orderly from before, as two figures push past Nureyev to descend on the hospital bed, one a little above eye level and the other firmly below. The woman who had been on the phone presses her hands to her mouth to stifle a gasp.

“Oh, gosh, this really is serious, isn’t it?” she breathes, and the tall man who had been at her heels, chattering away without seeming to notice that she was otherwise engaged, stumbles into her from behind. He’s half in and half out of a security uniform with a jacket at least one size too small across the shoulders, and his eyes go wide when they light on Benzaiten’s limp form.

“Holy shit,” he groans, turns back to the nurse. “He’s not dead, right? You would have told me if he was dead! I mean, I couldn’t actually listen to the voicemail, on account of my comms--”

“He’s in a coma,” Nureyev interrupts, and their eyes snap to him for the first time. He shuffles a little awkwardly, and clears his throat, wrong-footed by the attentive curiosity. “I...we were...at dinner, and he collapsed--some kind of poison--”

“Dinner?” the woman asks, and the man says, “Poison?” at nearly the same time, before the woman interjects, again, “Do I know you?”

Nureyev searches for an explanation for a long, uncertain moment, before the woman leans in closer, peering up at him through her rose-tinted eyeglasses. She blinks, once, and then breathes in sharply, delighted. “You saved his *life*, didn’t you, I can tell by that look on your face! Oh, it’s like something out of a movie, a handsome stranger sweeping Mistah Ben off his feet in his hour of need and carrying him to safety--”

Faltering, Nureyev steps backward. “I...actually, Benzaiten and I are--”

“Is he gonna be okay?” the tall man says, looking back and forth between the two of them so quickly that the strain must hurt his neck. “Rita, please, hold on a second, I gotta know.”

“I...I think so. Yes, I think the doctors said...a few days?” Nureyev blinks. “There was an...adverse reaction, with his cybernetic--”

“He’s stable,” the nurse confirms, a little shortly, “Very stable, and he’ll recover quickly as long as he gets plenty of peace and *quiet* to--”

“Perfect! I’ll set up visiting shifts just as soon as I call Missus Sasha back,” the woman--Rita--decides, with a firm nod. She sits down primly on the edge of the hospital bed and brings up her comms again. The orderly turns a disapproving expression on her, which she returns, tapping at the screen and huffing pointedly. “This hospital has a worse signal than Hoosegow, you know, takes me practically forever to track down one little untraceable number.”

The tall man, for his part, takes the seat Nureyev had previously occupied at the bedside. His brow is furrowed in concern, and his teeth worry at his bottom lip, already chapped and peeling.

After another moment, Rita springs up again. “What’s the nearest room with a window?” she demands of the orderly, “Unless you folks have a payphone somewhere, or a government database you wouldn’t mind sharin’.”

There’s a vacuum of silence following her departure. The tall man clears his throat, not looking at Nureyev, and asks. “So, uh. Do you and Ben...work together, or something?”

There’s old history here, with this man and the man wearing Nureyev’s stolen ring, and he can’t tell quite how far back it goes as yet. He sticks to shallower, safer waters for the moment, and says, a little evasively, “We met at the ballet, yes.” He remembers, abruptly, to play a character, and adds, “I’m an understudy there, actually. My name’s Robin.”

The tall man nods, and then, belatedly, seems to take his cue. “Oh. Oh! Mick. Mick Mercury, is my name. I dunno if Benten ever, like...mentioned me? But we grew up together, kind of.”

“Mick,” he echoes, pensively, and fibs, “Yes, of course, I remember the name.”

Mick Mercury looks back to him, either shell-shocked or flattered.

“Really?”

Hoping for an angle, Nureyev presses further. “He always spoke of you very fondly. I’ve heard plenty of thrilling stories about your adventures together.”

“Aw, geez, well,” Mercury flushes, a little. “I don’t know about that. Me and Sasha and Juno were really the ones who did most of the adventuring, I didn’t see him much, but I always thought--”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr. Mercury,” Nureyev says, offering him an optimistic half-smile. “You’re here now, aren’t you?” There’s a faint chime from the machinery to signal the hour, and he remembers, quite suddenly, a helpful granule of truth to help the lie go down smoother. “On...on his birthday.”

“Oh,” Mercury says, sadly. “I almost forgot about that.”

Outside in the hallway, there’s a rattling crash, and a muffled oath. Nureyev tenses, but a broad white smile breaks over Mercury’s face in response, and he stands, bouncing on the balls of his feet, as the door slides open a third time.

[image]

Nureyev sees an upturned collar, a mop of tight curls, a slightly unsteady, limping gait. “What idiot left a hoverbike in the middle of the damn hallway? A lady could break his goddamn neck--”

His voice is coarse and crackling-warm like a fire, and when he lifts his head a little higher Nureyev sees a strikingly familiar set of features set with unfamiliar lines and scars. Rough stubble over his jaw, a deep scar across the bridge of his nose, a single bright eye in his face with the other obscured by a leather eyepatch.

Benzaiten’s face, and not.

“Oh,” he continues, gaze alighting on Mercury. “Okay, yeah, I should have guessed that one.”

“Jayjay!” Mick cries, enthusiastically, arms thrown wide. “Thought you weren’t gonna make it, buddy!”

“What, is this a party now?” the newcomer says gruffly, “My mistake, totally thought we were in a hospital room.”

“Aw, Juno, c’mon, don’t be like that….”

“Don’t tell me what the hell I’m supposed to be like,” Juno snaps, marching further into the room. “Where’s Ben? What did he do this time?”

Nureyev is struck, quite suddenly, by the recollection of Benzaiten’s small, fragile laugh, the way his smile went sharp and pained. *I guess he finally got sick of me*. Something in the memory makes his gorge rise, which is perhaps what causes him to speak up, out of turn. “You might have the decency to ask with a little more tact.”

The other Steel stops, mid-stride, turns, and stares at him so directly that he feels almost unraveled, pierced to the soul, brows furrowed and lips slightly parted. Nureyev stares back, tilting his chin up and narrowing his eyes.

Finally the stare breaks, and the newcomer glances away. “Only if you tell me who I’m asking.”

“Robin Argent,” Nureyev declares, with a fierceness he’s not quite used to feeling burning hot in his gut. “I’m Benzaiten’s fiancé.”

“*What*?”

“Woah!” Mercury whirls to face him, surprise and delight warring on his face. “You should have said something before, buddy!” His hands come up to clasp Nureyev by the shoulders, jostling him affectionately. “Holy shit! Mazel tov!”

Nureyev bears the overbearing endearment with a flash of teeth that hopefully looks enough like a grin, and feels a little frisson of glee when he glimpses the other Steel’s stupefied face, over Mercury’s shoulder. “I didn’t want to….” he stammers out the prepared explanation. “We’d been so private, about everything--didn’t want to be accused of anything unprofessional. Some people don’t take well to workplace romances--”

Steel seems to shake himself out of his stupor, shooting Nureyev an unmistakable glare. “What the hell are you talking about? Benten’s not *engaged*. I’d know!”

Nureyev backs away from Mercury’s embrace, clutching at his collar in a way he knows will draw the eye to the ring on his finger. “And I’m sure he planned to tell you all about it,” he says, just a little accusingly, “The next time you came to visit.”

The furious noise Steel muffles behind his teeth has Mercury stepping between them, hands raised. “Fellas, please, can we not do this here? Juno, I’m sure it just...slipped Ben’s mind, that’s all.”

The door slides open once again, and the short woman from before pipes up, “Ooh, are we talkin’ about weddings now? Because I gotta say I make one fine figure of a bridesmaid, and I ain’t had a chance to show it off since Missus Sasha got hitched and I *won’t* be left out.”

The other woman accompanying her--slim dark suit, dark glasses, dark hair cropped close to her face--raises a prim eyebrow with a slit through the arch. “Juno. Mick,” she says, short and clipped. “Care to explain what’s going on here?”

Mick stammers, Juno groans, and crosses his arms over his chest. “Fine, okay.” He shrugs dismissively in Nureyev’s direction. “That’s Robin. He says he and Ben are--”

“Engaged!” Mick chimes in, and Juno nods, tersely.

“Sure, yeah. Robin, you’re already chummy with Mercury, but that’s my secretary Rita, and that’s Agent Sasha Wire.”

Agent Sasha Wire cracks a smile that could freeze an open flame. “Dark Matters,” she supplies.

It occurs to Nureyev as he reaches out to shake her gloved hand that it’s very possible he’s officially in over his head. “Charmed,” he manages, proud of the way his voice doesn’t even crack.

He’s not quite sure why he ends up at the secretary’s apartment, after all of that. Proceedings move quickly enough that they almost begin to blur together, and frankly he’s more than a little out of his element and has already been drugged once this evening.

Nureyev can recall, at some point, that there was an impressively heated row ostensibly about taking bedside shifts with not a few pointed barbs from the Agent and even more indignant scoffs from the disagreeable brother. For his part he’d tried to keep out of it, shifting closer to the other two until the argument devolved into a shouting match and the secretary grabbed him by one arm and the tall, hapless security guard by the other and announced very firmly that they

would all see Mistah Steel and Missus Sasha in the morning, goodbye and good night.

But he'd rather expected, following this announcement, to be bid farewell in the same fashion and sent off into the sleepless dark of Hyperion City. Certainly he hadn't expected to be bundled unceremoniously into the back of a car with a war-era hoverbike hanging out of the trunk and fussed over by a woman who barely came up to his chest standing on tiptoe.

He's still quite too shell-shocked to protest when he's bundled out of the car again and crowded into a cramped tenth-floor studio with a plasma screen for a wall and half an intricate model starliner scattered in perilously small pieces across the living room floor. Nureyev is still trying to determine whether this whole business is intended as an overture of friendship or an impromptu kidnapping when the secretary throws a blanket over his shoulders and Mick stumbles into the adjacent kitchen, loudly inquiring whether the lady and gentleman want any tea.

Nureyev opens his mouth, and shuts it again, and sits heavily on the slightly concave sofa. "Tea would be lovely," he manages, as gracefully as he can muster the energy.

There's a few thumps and crashes and one notable shatter of glass as Mick works, but Rita seems to pay the noise no mind, casting some documentary about the moons of Venus onto the plasma screen from her personal comms. Nureyev casts his mind back to try and determine whether she was in fact watching it the entire way back from the hospital, while driving the car. The matter remains open to question.

She clambers onto the other end of the sofa and fishes an open bag of something crunchy and coated in pungent dust off an end table, and asks, conversationally, "You ever seen this one, Mistah Argent?"

Nureyev settles the blanket a little closer around his shoulders, folding his legs up underneath him, and makes the mistake of responding in the negative.

After a few minutes of frenzied bombardment about the content of the stream and the director's past work and the lady who tamed the giraffes' baby cousin, who had apparently been in the same PhD program at Olympus Mons twenty years ago before Miss Rita dropped out to move back to Hyperion City--after that, Mick Mercury emerges

again with a kitchen towel wrapped around one slightly bloodied finger and two cups of scalded tea. Nureyev accepts his with a grateful nod and a hastily stifled flinch at the temperature of the mug.

The last drink he had been served tonight was poisoned, and he doesn't feel particularly up to testing his luck a second time. But he is, truth be told, a little thirsty, and after a little while the mug goes from scalding to radiating a pleasant warmth, and before he can really register that he's taken a sip the mug is half empty.

Perhaps the tea is to blame for the way his eyes grow heavy and his head begins, gradually, to droop. Or perhaps it's the soft flickering light of the plasma screen, and the warmth of the blanket on his shoulders, or the easy, rambling conversation that passes between his two hosts, a running commentary colored by years of friendly acquaintance. Or perhaps it's only the lingering exhaustion from his last interstellar flight, or more than that, the way he's scarcely made time to rest between this job and the five, six, seven that came before it, swinging from one star to the next almost too quickly to gauge which direction he'll be tugged in next, only hoping that his luck will hold and it won't be a collision course.

He doesn't know quite when he falls asleep, is the point. Only that between one blink of the eyes and the next, the night has passed and the sun has started to rise.

The world is still tinted with the fuzzy blue-grey of dawn, and Nureyev is quite alone, sprawled out across the whole length of the sofa with his feet danging off one end and the blanket pulled up to his chin. His glasses are pushed up to the top of his head, and he suspects his makeup is beginning to smudge.

Nureyev maneuvers himself upward, by cautious degrees, and reorients himself as best he can.

Dark Matters, he thinks. Point one. *Dark Matters* is involved now.

Point the second...Benzaiten Steel could no longer tell Nureyev where he hid Ilse Maurya or the package that had been in her possession even if he wanted to. Point three, of course, is that some party or other prefers it that way. Pilot Pereyra has enemies. That's a trait politicians and prima ballerinas have in common.

Point four--

Nureyev twists the engagement ring around his finger, attention

caught by the way it flashes in the early morning light, and the way he has already ceased to feel its weight as something abnormal. He blinks, and cannot remember what point four was meant to be.

He must have slept at least six hours in one stretch, Nureyev realizes, quite out of the blue. He tries to cast his mind back to the last time that had happened, and comes up disappointingly short. Perhaps the Jade Palace on Balder, while he'd been posing as the long-lost prince? Certainly a mattress that soft would warrant indulging in a full night's rest, but he can't recall if he ever truly took advantage of the opportunity, between late stints forging paperwork and creeping through the hallways studying the ancient architecture and pocketing gewgaws.

Either the overexertion must have gotten to his head, or the oversleeping.

Nureyev folds the blanket and deposits it back on the couch, lips pressed in a thin line. After this job is over, he can take the time off to sleep in all he wants. Go back to the singing waterfalls on Io, perhaps, or spend a few days on a luxury Earthen cruiseliner. A short vacation, before he's back to work. If time allows, of course. If financial obligations allow.

Meanwhile, point four comes rushing back as he re-applies his eyeliner in the distorted lens of a firestarting hand-mirror. Ben Steel cannot tell him where Ilse Maurya is, but it might prove worthwhile to search his apartment nonetheless.

He folds the mirror away, and is barely three paces from the door when it slides open from the other side, admitting Juno Steel to stand, broad shoulders filling more of the doorway's width than his slouched posture fills vertically.

"Oh," the other Steel says, flatly. "It's you."

"Good morning." Nureyev makes little effort to disguise the contempt in his tone.

Juno Steel raises the brow not obscured by an eyepatch, and crosses his arms unsubtly over his chest. "The hell are you doing here?"

Nureyev takes a step back, and braces himself, a little defensively. "If you must know," he says, teeth gritted, "I was invited."

He hears the creak of the door and assumes by the light tread that it's

Rita emerging from the bedroom without turning to look. “Mistah Steel?” Her slightly scratchy voice confirms it a moment later.

Juno Steel’s glare turns to a petulant scowl, and his gaze moves over Nureyev’s shoulder. “Sasha’s got her people on duty now,” he explains, without preamble. “Room’s practically on lockdown, she’s got everything tied up in enough red tape to giftwrap a starliner.”

He can hear the grin in Rita’s voice. “I’ll make sure to let her know you said thank you, boss,” she says, devolving halfway through into a yawn. “Where ya goin’, Mistah Argent?”

“I…” Nureyev glances between them. “Home, I suppose. I’d hate to impose on your generous hospitality any longer than--”

“Aw, it’s no trouble, you don’t take up a whole lot of space, you know, you bein’ so lanky and all. No offense!”

“Ah...none taken?”

“I’ll give you a ride,” Juno Steel announces, quite suddenly and firmly, and when Nureyev looks to him he can see a grim determination settling over his weathered features. A sharpness to his eye. Something twists uncomfortably in Nureyev’s stomach.

His own lips twist into a thin smile. “Don’t put yourself out on my account--”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” he refutes, with a faux-cheery quality that sends a cold shiver down his spine. “Actually, I *insist*.”

Nureyev has had less unsettling threats from mobsters. He wonders, for a frantic instant, what line of work his fiance’s estranged twin might be in, whether he might stand a real chance of earning himself a pair of concrete boots and a short swim in the nearest reservoir for making an enemy of the wrong lady--

“You be good to Robin, Mistah Steel,” Rita chimes in, warningly, and Juno Steel scoffs, waving him out the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, dryly. “I’ll play nice if he does.” He fixes Nureyev with his sharp stare again, and shows a grin that’s all teeth. “Come on, loverboy, I won’t bite.”

If another little frisson runs down Nureyev’s spine at that, well...it would be difficult to deny that Juno Steel, for all his faults, does have

his brother's looks. Nureyev files the thought neatly away where it can cause him no further distraction, and follows.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Juno Steel is suspicious.

Chapter Notes

> There IS a specific warning for this chapter but I will mention it in end notes because it happens unexpectedly. Thanks again for reading and commenting and kudos-ing, etc! Love you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nureyev relishes the opportunity to watch the other Steel's face sour when the home address he provides is for Benzaiten's apartment. It's entertaining, how easy it is to get under Juno's skin with barely an effort. Foolish, how overbearingly protective he is of the brother he all but abandoned for years.

His tenacity might even verge on endearing, if the full brunt of that suspicion weren't turned on Nureyev himself at the moment.

"So," he says through gritted teeth. "How'd you and Benten, uh. Meet?"

Nureyev doesn't quite feel up to conceding him, as yet. "I believe I mentioned last night, Mr. Steel."

"Detective Steel," he snaps, and Nureyev listens.

"Ah." He takes a moment to compose himself, slots every panic response neatly back into their appropriate files, and flips quickly back through the brief history of his conversations with Benzaiten, connecting the dots. "Yes, right, of course. The Private Investigator." A choked laugh bubbles up in his throat, and he shoots the detective a look. "Is this an interrogation, then?"

"Something like that," Juno Steel tells him, flatly, not taking his eyes from the road. "We're here."

"I'm well aware," Nureyev blusters. "Would you prefer to have this discussion in the car, or could you suffer to come inside?"

The detective grumbles as he clambers out of the drivers seat,

slamming the door behind him. Nureyev follows with all the decorum he can muster. He's still retrieving the keycard from his pocket when Juno Steel's ire apparently reaches some kind of apotheosis. He levels a finger accusingly in his direction, and says, abruptly, "You're hiding something."

"Am I?" Nureyev swipes the card, entering his best guess at the four-digit code and swallowing a triumphant grin as it flashes green. It takes luck and skill in equal measure. "That's news to me, Detective."

"I'm gonna find out what it is," he announces.

Nureyev holds the door ajar for the lady and levels him a nod. "Well, then," he says. "I suppose I ought to wish you luck with your investigation."

He glances past the detective into the apartment, and takes note of another theory confirmed. A second streak of luck today, quite closely tied in with the first.

Ilse, Benzaiten called his missing dancer. Not Elizabeth. One can give quite a lot away with the casual use of a nickname. But there are unmistakably two jackets hung beside one another on the coat hook, two wine glasses sitting on the counter. The sort of evidence a detective's keen eye could hardly miss for trying that this apartment has very lately been dually occupied.

Juno brushes his fingers against the mezuzah on the doorframe in passing, and steps inside, and goes still.

Nureyev stifles a grin, and offers an unapologetic, "Pardon me," as he makes a beeline for the bedroom. Ilse Maurya strikes him as the sort to favor a monogram, and to come across the wrong initials on a pair of slippers now would be a streak of bad luck.

It's the work of a moment to search the room and hide what little needs to be hidden, pulling on a discarded sweater and shifting a silk robe to the back of the closet, out of sight and out of mind. He glimpses something else worthy of note as he rearranges the wardrobe, and throws another sweater over it for good measure.

From the living room, he hears a muffled shriek and a hiss, and turns back to see Juno staring daggers into six compound eyes. "Ben got a damn *cat*?" he demands, voice cracking just a little.

The cat perched delicately on the back of the armchair flicks its

barbed tail and tilts its chin up, defiantly. Nureyev assumes from the pedigree of the animal that it's very likely that Ilse Maurya in fact brought the damn cat with her, but he's in no hurry to correct the mistake. He crouches, a little, fishing through his pockets for an appropriate bribe, and comes across a palmful of the odd, pungent-smelling crunchy snacks Rita had favored the night before. He extends the offering, and the cat moves to accept with a pleased meow, butting its face against his leg.

He can't quite settle on what greeting one presumably gives one's pets, traditionally, and forgoes it for the moment, choosing instead to scratch as unobtrusively as he can behind one ear, and smile.

Juno turns the glare on him, too, for good measure, and sits on the armchair with a huff. "What's Benten's favorite color?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

Nureyev lets the cat begin to knead gently at his leg, and quirks one eyebrow. "I heard you, yes, but I must say I don't see the *point*."

"So you admit you don't know?"

"Pink," Nureyev fibs, definitively.

Juno scowls. "That was an easy one."

Nureyev sighs. "Oh, well, by all means, pick another question, it's only *fair*."

"Shut up. How does he drink his coffee?"

"Would you like me to shut up or to answer the question, Detective? I can't reasonably do both."

"*I'm* asking the questions here."

Nureyev scoffs. "And you're doing a marvelous job of it, too. A masterful interrogation." He quickly pieces together scraps of half-memory and a backwards glance at the narrow aisle of the apartment's kitchen. "He prefers chai, actually, these days."

Juno Steel bristles at that, as he has at nearly every word out of Peter's mouth, truth or lie. "So you think you know my own brother better than I do, now? Is that it?"

The cat lets out a displeased mewl and slips through Nureyev's fingers to dart behind the sofa. He purses his lips. "I don't believe I ever made that claim--"

"He ever tell you about that laser burn on his chest? Where it came from? Who put it there and how goddamn close I was to burying him?"

Nureyev looks him square in the face, and sees in a slightly different light the several shades to Detective Steel's ire. There's petty jealousy, certainly, but perhaps more than that a simple, fraternal concern, for a troublemaking brother who's once again caught up in matters beyond his scope.

"I…" he clears his throat, and determines to accept the small defeat. "Not in so many words. He didn't like to talk about it."

A little of the outrage vanishes from Juno's face. "That...kinda makes sense, yeah." He picks some tchotchke off a side table to turn it over in his hands, and glances down at the pattern of the carpet. "Benten trusts people too easily for his own good. Especially...people he *loves*, or whatever. Always giving them second chances, when he should be cutting his losses and getting out. So I'm sorry if I don't believe you're *Mister Right* just because you show up out of the blue with a pretty face and a convenient little love story, Robin."

It stings, a little, the sharp truth of his accusation. Perhaps a rare prickling of conscience, unprofessional as it may be. Nureyev pulls himself to his feet, slowly, and tries not to let the harsh words unbalance him. "I think you ought to be leaving my apartment now, Detective Steel," he says, shorter than he means to.

Juno ducks his head in something like contrition. "Hey, I shouldn't have said it like...I didn't mean--"

"Now, please," Nureyev interrupts him, gesturing at the door, and he goes.

He stands in the empty living room long enough to hear the thud of a slamming door somewhere below, and turns back to his work with a sigh. He collects himself.

Under the sweater at the back of the closet rest a pair of pointe shoes in soft baby-pink satin, ribbon ties trailing behind them. Nureyev lifts one with a finger and thumb, turns it over in hand to inspect the initials laser-carved on the well-worn soles. Not Ilse Maurya's initials,

but the next best thing: a rather ostentatious *P.P.*

“There you are,” he says, under his breath. A job well done, and in record time, despite the wealth of distractions complicating the last twenty-four hours.

He grasps the shoe by the block at the toe, and brushes the pad of his thumb over the side, searching for the latch, but it proves as elusive as the slippers themselves had initially been. Nureyev frowns, crouching to examine the shoe closer, and continues to scrub his thumb across the sim-leather and satin.

He hears a hopeful click, and goes still.

Until it occurs to him, after a flash of a moment, that the click came from entirely the wrong direction. Nureyev manages half a turn to face the barrel of the pistol levelled at him before the stun blast sinks between his shoulderblades. He feels the shock race up his spine, jaw locking before he can manage even a muffled cry, and then his vision goes entirely dark.

It would probably be quite a shock to some to hear the number of times Peter Nureyev has staked his career on his ability to play dead. That’s why he takes care to feature the skill prominently on his resume, just below the theft of the Covetor’s Jewel and before the blank space where another man might provide his references.

When he comes to, arms pulled taught and zip-tied to the iron crossbars of a chair, head pounding and heart racing, he does not allow himself to flinch. He keeps his breath even, his head lolling to one side, and after a moment’s further consideration begins to twitch his fingers to bring the feeling back to them, fumbling for the laser pen in his left sleeve.

The tiny movements ought to have been subtle enough to escape anyone’s attention, but they appear to be poorly timed nonetheless. A nearby door creaks open with a harsh whirr, and the tread of heavy, unevenly matched bootsteps echoes across the floor. Concrete, most likely, he calculates. A basement, or a warehouse, or somewhere equally conventionally grim.

“Wakey-wakey,” someone growls, just convincingly enough that

Nureyev stills, quickly renewing his calculations in the light of this unexpected turn of events. He shifts his weight against the chair and feels it tip only a fraction of an inch before it collides with a flat, solid surface. “I got a bone to pick with you, see?”

He inches one eye open, and then the other, grimacing into the slightly lopsided face of a woman brandishing, of all things, a baseball bat. She has a star-shaped burn scar radiating out from one missing ear and a pronounced underbite that makes her resemble nothing so much as a carnivorous tropical fish. “Ah. Hello,” he ventures, tentatively. “How can I help you?”

“You’re gonna answer me a couple questions, see?” Nureyev curls his fingers, feels the tip of one fingernail catch against the laser pen. He makes a small sound of assent, trying to keep still, carefully calculating every movement and timing his breath. The Piranha Woman smiles wide, and gestures with the bat. “And I’m gonna encourage you to give me the answers I wanna hear, right?”

“That sounds very…very reasonable,” Nureyev determines.

“And then I’m gonna break your kneecaps just for fun, because I’m havin’ a hard day,” she grunts.

Nureyev feels his breath hitch, and the tool slips out of reach, falling sideways into the lining of his sleeve. The edge of the ziptie cuts sharply into the side of his wrist. “Ah.”

“You a friend of Mx. Mayor?”

Nureyev looks her up and down, trying quickly to determine which of Hyperion’s many crime empires the Piranha belongs to and ultimately deciding that the glint in her eye promises nothing good whatever the answer may be. And, of course, he’d signed a non-disclosure agreement, under an alias he’s quite fond of if not his real name. “I can’t say we’ve ever met,” he says.

The Piranha frowns, perhaps a little disappointed, and then shrugs. “Damn.”

“Was that…the right answer?”

She scratches at her missing ear, and clicks her tongue. “Yeah, looks like you might just be plain old unlucky, pal.”

Nureyev fumbles for the tool again, and settles for sawing at the

plastic tie with the setting on his engagement ring. Certainly less elegant, but the situation seems to call for some urgency.

“So if I was to ask you about the construction plans for Newtown, and why you were diggin’ for em,” the Piranha continues, looping one finger under a chain around her throat and lifting out a micro thumb drive until it catches the light with a metallic flash. “You would say….”

He can feel his attention snap to the device too quickly, swallows and tries to backtrack, glancing away and sawing more quickly against the ziptie. “Oh, is that what that is?”

She narrows her eyes. “You know, I don’t think I like that answer very much.” Nureyev flinches as she brings the bat up and then flinches again when the arc of her swing is interrupted by the crash of the door behind her slamming open.

“What the fuck?” she demands, whirling on one heel and then staggering as a laser catches her between the ribs. Stun blast, most likely, from the way she continues to swear profusely on the way down.

Nureyev doesn’t recognize the woman behind the blaster, but what does strike a familiar chord is the name she calls back over one broad shoulder as she stoops to take the Piranha’s pulse. “He’s in here, Steel!”

When he looks to the doorway, he can see the Detective’s familiar worn face appear, his eye bright and cold and his jaw set tight, like he’s half an instant from setting off on a new tirade. Relief, or exasperation, perhaps, makes his heart skip a beat at the sight.

“Juno,” he says, before he can help it. “Should I expect a rescue, or another interrogation?”

Detective Steel’s jaw trembles, and he marches forward too quickly to stop his advance, throwing his arms around Nureyev before he can quite process what’s happened. “Idiot,” he grumbles, voice low in his ear. Nureyev feels an unwitting blush rise to his cheeks. “I circle back to apologize and you’re already getting kidnapped under my goddamn nose? Ben would kill me if I brought you back dead.”

The other woman with him laughs, and Nureyev feels utterly frozen in place. “Detective?”

Juno Steel backs away as abruptly as he'd begun, carefully avoiding eye contact. "Right, sorry, should probably work on untying you, huh?"

"Detective Steel--"

There's a sudden flash of heat as he feels a plasma knife click on, just beyond his vision when he cranes his head to look. Juno slices through the bindings with an expert swiftness, his rough fingertips brushing against Nureyev's wrists to hold him still. "You should keep one of these on you next time, Robin," he says, "Comes in handy when you get tied up as often as I do."

Nureyev looks at him, not certain how to reply, and Juno clears his throat. "I meant, uh, I meant like kidnapping--"

"I'm gonna go get the car running, Steel, you catch up when you're ready," the woman with the blaster says, a small smile catching at one corner of her mouth.

Nureyev watches her go, the mobster's immobile body slung over one shoulder, as he rubs the feeling back into his fingers. "Who's she?"

Juno grabs for the lifeline without hesitation. "Alessandra Strong. Wire, I mean, actually, uh. Detective friend of mine. Well, ex."

Nureyev cocks a brow. "Ex-friend?"

"Shut up, you know what I mean. Sasha's better for her anyway. They're...you know. Good for each other." He rubs one hand along the back of his neck, and offers the other, palm up. "Like you and Benten," he pronounces, extending a clear olive branch,

For whatever reason, his breath catches in his chest when he reaches up to take the hand, and all he can manage to voice is a quiet, "Oh."

Juno uses the leverage to help him to his feet, and hesitates a moment longer before letting his hand go. "I owe you an apology."

Robin Argent should have something witty to say to that, but Peter Nureyev finds himself inconveniently tongue-tied. Juno clears his throat.

"Listen, I--growing up, Mom had this whole thing about how Ben and I were supposed to protect each other from the big, mean world, and I've had a pretty shitty track record of it. No world's best brother

trophies here." He shuffles his feet in an attempt to distract from the way his voice has gone raw with pent-up emotion. "Couldn't even protect him from Mom herself, in the end. She's the one who put that laser between his ribs, I--I should have been there to stop her."

There's nothing to say to a confession of that magnitude besides a slightly nauseated, "Juno--"

But he doesn't acknowledge it, just buries his fists in the pockets of his coat and pushes on. "Least I can do to make it up to him is to stop acting like an ass and admit that you're important to him, and I--I'm glad he's got someone, after all. That he's happy."

Nureyev nods quietly, and tries to disregard the yawning pit of guilt slowly opening behind his ribs. Turns his thoughts away from the mess he will inevitably leave behind when the job is done and he disappears. "Then we'll put it behind us. Fresh start?"

"Sounds good to me."

The Detective offers him a thin, lopsided smile, and turns away, and Nureyev reaches out to catch his wrist before he can think better of it. "You care about Benzaiten very much," he says, in a small voice. "Be sure that he knows it, in future?"

There's a question in Juno's eye, but he nods, offers up a hesitant, "Yeah. Yeah, I'll do that."

Alessandra Wire has the Piranha woman tied up in so many complex knots that it's a challenge to spot the telltale glint of the thumb drive still under her collar. Juno looks between the other detective and the ropes with a slightly complicated expression on his face. "Wow," he says, half under his breath and too quickly, "You, uh. You've been practicing those a lot, huh?"

She raises one eyebrow as she slams the trunk closed. "You really want me to answer that, Steel?"

"Not even a little bit."

Nureyev clears his throat, casting a wide net to search for any new topic of conversation that might dispel a bit of the lingering

awkwardness. “You wouldn’t happen to have found anyone else inside, would you, Ms. Wire?”

Alessandra’s gaze is as unnervingly piercing as Juno’s. “In the abandoned warehouse? No such luck, Robin.”

Juno turns back to him, incredulous. “Were you...looking for someone?”

Perhaps it won’t completely counteract the bitter taste he leaves in these people’s mouths on his departure, but Nureyev hopes he can do something to aid Benzaiten Steel, as a parting gift. It helps that the cause continues to offer a convenient alibi. “Elizabeth Maurya,” he admits.

The two detectives exchange a glance, but only Wire seems to find any context for the name. “The ballerina?”

He relates the story as best he can while obscuring his own role in it, dredging up rumors and half-truths in a slightly hushed voice. By the morning he means to be ten million creds richer and halfway to the next closest star, but if Benzaiten’s friend isn’t buried under the sand somewhere, perhaps she can be safely returned.

“She asked you if you worked for *the Mayor*?”

Juno settles into a slouch with his arms crossed over his chest. “Everybody knows Pereyra’s a criminal,” he scoffs. “That’s, like, their whole platform.”

With the pair of them settled into debate about the relative merit of attempting to prosecute the most powerful person in Hyperion City, it’s the work of a moment to reach down and retrieve his prize. Nureyev feels oddly ambivalent about the victory, at the moment. He tucks the thumb drive into his own pockets, hoping the satisfaction will come later.

Chapter End Notes

> Warning: canon-typical violence here extends to kidnapping and threats of torture because there was a specific character I wanted to cameo and that is what she does, unfortunately

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> There is a job to be done, and a falsehood to be maintained. Unforseen complications arise in both areas.

Chapter Notes

> No specific warnings to this chapter again except for that it is my favorite. Enjoy!!

The rest of the day passes uneventfully, which is a novelty in and of itself. Nureyev plays at mundanity a few hours more with the strange little family he's fibbed his way into. Rita offers him a taste of something coated in pink, fishy dust, which he regrets immediately. Mick regales him with endearing and utterly unbelievable accounts of his childhood adventures with Ben, and Juno, and Sasha, while the latter two argue in the kitchen and emerge, quite suddenly, with a tureen of soup they insist on passing around.

Nureyev has infiltrated banquets hosted by intergalactic royalty, and he has lived hand-to-mouth on dark, dangerous streets. But the simple idea of sharing a meal with a few generous strangers around a table in an overcrowded apartment is less familiar. Disarmingly so, at some moments, when he laughs too loudly at another of Mick's tall tales and looks up to see Juno's eye fixed on him. Or when he catches the candlelight flicker of a smile dancing across Juno's face in return.

"Robin," Sasha Wire says, dark sunglasses tucked casually into the placket of her shirt. "Help me clean up the kitchen?"

He wavers on his feet a moment, uncertain, and smiles. "Of course."

The agent bustles between counters, methodically stacking bowls and mugs and silverware with an effortless, slightly mechanical grace. She provides Nureyev with no further direction, and he stands with arms akimbo to watch her a moment longer until she sets the lot of it down in the sink and wrenches the water on abruptly, hissing just loud enough to mask the clatter of porcelain and aluminum and glass. "You dry," she says.

"Of...course," Nureyev repeats, glancing around for a dishtowel and eventually finding one slung over a cabinet door. There's a creature

embroidered on the front that appears to be both werewolf and unicorn, as ever evidenced by Miss Rita's discerning taste.

Sasha Wire has already set to work with a handful of the chipped bowls by the time he returns, scrubbing at them with a slightly distant focus, steam rising from the sink to slightly obscure her face and fog Nureyev's glasses as he waits to be handed the first of the clean dishes.

Searching for an opportunity and finding none, he begins, awkwardly, "Was there a problem--"

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," Sasha Wire interrupts, without preamble, and it occurs to Nureyev that the volume of the water pressure is also sufficient to obscure casual conversation.

"Oh?" he manages, as she thrusts a bowl into his waiting hands and sets to scrubbing furiously at something burnt caked onto the side of a pot.

"What's going on with you and Juno?"

Nureyev fumbles at the dish in his hands, the soapy surface sliding out of control, and nearly loses composure. "Wh--I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Agent Wire."

She throws him a sharp look without breaking her stride. "Please, Robin, you don't get to the position I'm in by being gullible. Couldn't even pass the entrance exam, actually."

Nureyev adjusts his grip on the dishtowel, dries the bowl firmly and sets it down. "I'm not sure I fully understand what you mean to accuse me of."

"You missed a spot," she says, without pointing it out, and adds another pump of soap to her scrubbing pot. "I haven't seen it happen in years, but I know what it looks like when someone starts to act like Juno and Benten are interchangeable. You might want to figure out if you picked the right one before anybody gets their heart broken."

Water surges out of the sink and against the backsplash of the wall and the front of her button-down, and she turns to press a handful of silverware into Nureyev's grip. "Does that clear things up for you?"

He feels his heart hammering in his chest, fast and heavy in a way it

hasn't beat for decades, and manages a weak laugh. The engagement ring sparkles on his finger, and he curls his fingers around it. "I rather thought I made my decision obvious already."

She snorts. "Well. Make sure you break it to Juno soon," she says, coldly. "And stop looking at him like he hung every star in the sky, if you think you can manage it. Idiot's half in love with you already."

He purses his lips together, tries to sort through the circumstances available to him for a worthy strategy, and comes up rather less prepared than he had hoped for. Juno Steel scarcely stopped hating him until a few hours ago. That particular charge is entirely unfounded.

But perhaps Nureyev himself could do to spend a little less time thinking about the soft, flickering way Juno Steel smiles, in future. There might be something in that.

It feels like treading on barbed wire, strangely, like one misstep would be a catastrophic shock, that if he does not watch his step there will be blood in the water. Blood in the water already, by the way Agent Wire's face goes icy and hard. It's a strange thing to fear. It would be the matter of an instant to vanish at the first hint of trouble, to walk out the door and disappear from the carefully cultivated lie he's lived in the past few days, never to return. That is, in fact, the whole plan.

He sleeps on Rita's couch again, as deeply as he had the first night, lulled by the surprisingly soothing murmur of an old cartoon rerun and the rhythmic clattering of the secretary's rapid typing.

Even in his dreams, Peter Nureyev runs. The wind buffets his cheeks and blows his hair into his eyes, and his feet pound against concrete, gravel, glass. His heart is thundering swift and steady in his chest, and he can feel adrenaline turn his blood to fire in his veins. The whole of the universe is spread out before him, one vast sparkling jewel ripe for the taking.

Whatever pursues him, he puts it out of mind. The past is inconsequential. In the present, he hears a second set of footsteps mirror his own, glances to one side and sees a glimpse of a single bright eye in a scar-lined face, piercing him to the core. A strong, steady hand grasps at his own, and holds it tight.

Nureyev feels a laugh startled out of him by the exhilaration combined with surprise. For a moment, he thinks he could run forever.

He's jarred awake, this time, by the buzz of a notification on his work comms.

It's dark in the apartment, and quite still. The others gone home, and his host fast asleep, snoring audibly where she's slumped in her armchair. It feels safer, here, to pull out the thumb drive on its thin silver chain and watch it turn slowly in the air.

He takes a moment to inhale, settle his disquieted thoughts and put away everything but the work. Adjusts his posture, presses his lips together, and blinks. Clears his mind. Exhales.

The half of Peter Nureyev which has made a career on sucking every drop from the marrow of life and then disappearing the moment trouble arises reminds him that in light of the circumstances, this little treasure would be best utilized by fencing it to the highest bidder. Pilot Pereyra may not be the highest bidder, or would perhaps be willing to renegotiate terms if their arm were twisted, just a little.

The other half of Peter Nureyev, the one which is stubbornly concerned with the greater good and not with the greater paycheck, thinks that perhaps there was a reason Ilse Maurya never delivered her package in the first place. Perhaps this little treasure is safer kept hidden away from the people who want it most.

Whatever option he chooses, further consideration is required.

Nureyev plies an available tablet from a drawer under the coffee table, and links the thumb drive. Hacking isn't a particular strength of his, but he does have an eye for meticulous research, and he recognizes the symbol etched across the side of the little device. Martian history. Or merely a legend dating from the early days of the war.

The file is sparse, and not very heavily encrypted. One folder with a map to a city whose existence is widely considered to be a fringe conspiracy theory, and a second folder with a prototype THEIA microchip whose function is not immediately clear.

Nureyev frowns, and opens the second folder.

Hyperion General is still dark and quiet as the horizon begins to shift towards the cool blue of sunrise. Nureyev resists the urge to glance over his shoulder, stomach still roiling with his unpleasant discovery. His employer would be hard pressed to seek him out here, with a Dark Matters agent lurking solemnly beside the ward door.

Benzaiten Steel is asleep, still and silent as the grave save the intermittent noises of the monitors around his bed. The engagement ring looks strange on a hand with an IV protruding awkwardly from the wrist.

Nureyev sits and watches him without speaking. He feels the strangest urge to confess to something, though what exactly he can't decide.

After another moment, though, there's a rattling sound at the doorway that decides for him. Nureyev slips behind a half-drawn curtain and out of sight as the door slides ajar, and Juno Steel's familiar, uneven footfalls echo over the tile.

He doesn't sit right away, stops in the middle of the room and reverses. There's a harsh shudder of one of the small folding tables being dragged across the floor, and the bizarre rattle echoes again before he takes a chair. Nureyev risks a glance to see board game pieces scattered haphazardly over the table, Juno arranging them and then re-arranging them with a grumble.

"Cred Creeper," he announces, abruptly, to the dimly lit room. "You still remember how to play?"

Nureyev goes still but for the pounding of his heart, but Juno just laughs to himself and starts to shuffle a deck of cards. "Yeah, well. I remember winning most of the time, anyway. Can't keep all the rules straight in my head, but you're in a goddamn coma, so--"

Juno throws a few of the cards down on the table, shuffles a few pieces around, and swears. "Don't remember that piece being there before. Don't tell me you're cheating! No, just trying to level the playing field, huh? You're a dick, Benten, you know that?"

He shuffles the cards again, counts them out under his breath, pauses. "I'm a dick," he says, a little softer. "You'd think I could let you have this, just once, right? Just a nice thing that you have that I don't. Like the galaxy's most winning smile. Heh."

The soft little whisper of a laugh makes something squeeze tight in Nureyev's chest, and he grits his teeth trying not to gasp for air. He looks away, but it isn't enough to miss the rest of Juno's admission.

"You found a good guy, Ben," he says, in his warm, rasping voice. "I like him. Too much, probably. Wake up before I do something stupid about it, alright?

The monitors continue to whirr and beep, and Benzaiten doesn't answer. Juno sweeps the cards and pieces back into the box with one swipe of his arm, and retreats as abruptly as he had arrived.

Nureyev turns the engagement ring over in his hand a moment longer. He likes its sparkle less now than before.

The comms patches through and then blips once, twice. There's a soft musical chime, and a voice, distorted by distance but still as smooth and saccharine as it had sounded in person.

"You've got Pilot," they drawl. "Make it snappy if you can, buddy, I've got a city to run."

"Only a moment of your time, then," he agrees, affect coming across a little stiffer than he had hoped. "I was wondering if you'd have any use for a ticket to the ballet tonight."

There's a short, deliberate pause. "What's playing?"

Nureyev hums. "Oh, *Onegin*, I believe. If the classics don't tempt you, it should at least give me a chance to return that item you mislaid last week."

Pereyra laughs, delighted. "You're quick! Fine," they declare. "I'll be there. Seems to me like I owe you one, friend."

There's a click as the call disconnects. Nureyev watches the last of the files transfer, and wonders distantly whether he's going to regret this.

He finds his way back through the waking city, another face lost in

the crowd, easily passed over and forgotten within an instant. Disappearing in plain sight.

When he reaches his destination, he swings himself up onto one of the old fire escapes and makes his way to the proper floor, unlatching the analog lock on the drafty window and slipping into the darkened studio. It would be easy enough to turn the corner and go in the stage door--he's expected, after all--but he's feeling flighty in a way that's proving difficult to shake.

A clean break, that should settle things. Keep him from falling back into that dangerous orbit around the motley crew of strange bedfellows he's made on Mars. Around one man more than the rest.

Nureyev stretches at the barre, partly to keep up appearances and partly for the satisfaction of loosening the stiffness in his spine gained from two nights' sleeping on a sofa with a minor kidnapping between.

It happens, sometimes, that people are taken in by the too-perfect sheen of the facades he puts on. Fall in love with men who never existed, who vanish in the blink of an eye and leave them temporarily brokenhearted and several thousand creds poorer. Barely last month, there'd been a particularly persistent heiress at an auction who'd proposed marriage on the spot, and he'd scarcely escaped unscathed.

It happens less often that their misplaced affection is returned. Nureyev has been very fortunate in that respect so far. But it seems, at this juncture, his luck has run out. Juno Steel is at once an obstinately difficult and a precariously easy man to love.

He flexes one leg, and attempts a passable pirouette, demi-pointe. Then a *fouetté* that sends him wildly off course. Nureyev exhales swiftly, sharply, through his nose, and blinks in frustration. Tries it again, and then once more when he can still spot his jaw clenching tight with the effort.

He stops, after another minute of this, out of breath and sweating and galled in a way he can't place until he leans against the barre again and catches the shine of the stolen ring on his finger. Envy, he recognizes quite suddenly. He's envious of a man he made up, who has the freedom to stay here, as long as he wants, while Peter Nureyev has only ever been called on to the next job, and the one after that, and on until some distant endpoint he has never allowed himself to dwell on in the light of day.

Robin Argent is from Io, but he belonged to Hyperion City the

moment he set foot there, in an apartment with two jackets hung side by side on the coat hooks and a cat curled up in the window seat, and a motley crew of detectives and their secretaries and their childhood friends to gather around a table and share a meal like all the priceless diamonds in the galaxy couldn't make them one cred richer. Robin Argent has no debts to pay, no blood on his hands, no secrets it would be best if everyone forgot.

Nureyev almost hates him for that.

There's a rap on the door, which slides to before he even has the chance to turn on his heel. He hears the uneven footstep, and quickly takes a breath to steel himself, filing the strange tumult in his head and heart away where it can do him no further harm.

Juno Steel is looking at him a little blankly, hands still shoved deep in his pockets as always. His single dark eye is a little wide. "Uh, hey."

Nureyev raises an eyebrow, reaching back to wipe the sheen of sweat from the back of his neck.

"Just...I just wanted to see how you were doing," Juno provides by way of explanation, shrugging out of his coat and kicking off his heavy boots so they don't scuff the marley floor. "Make sure you didn't get abducted again, or something. Rita said you left before she woke up this morning."

Somehow, it hadn't occurred to him that Juno might be persistent enough to follow. Nureyev clears his throat. "I'm an early riser."

"Everything okay, Robin?"

That chokes a laugh out of him. His eyes fall shut. "I suppose as fine as it can be."

"Yeah," Juno finishes the thought for him, stands a little awkwardly still framed by the door. "Listen, you don't have to pretend, alright? It's hard, missing Benten. I get that you're worried about him."

Nureyev tries not to feel off-balance. He smiles, one of Robin Argent's wide, confident smiles. "It's just strange," he brushes off. "Difficult to practice. This was meant to be a *pas de deux*, you know."

It's not a deliberate invitation, except for the way Nureyev's heart skips a beat when Juno bites his lip and says, hesitant, "I could--I mean, Ben never stopped trying to teach me, when we were kids, gave

me a lesson after he came home from every lesson. It's been a long time, but--"

"Juno," he interrupts, and the name tastes so sweet in his mouth it begins to chase away a little of the earlier bitterness.

He doesn't extend a hand, not until Juno swallows and says, roughly. "Yeah?" He winds his fingers with Nureyev's like an afterthought.

The single point of contact between them makes Nureyev's stomach lurch like he's leaning off the edge of a starscraper. He ghosts his other hand along the soft line of Juno's waist, hesitant. "May I have this dance?"

Juno looks to the place where their hands are joined, and back to Nureyev's face, and grins. "Don't drop me."

He follows beautifully, slotting into Nureyev's side, matching him step for step. Watching with that ceaseless keen concentration, never missing a turn or spin or sidestep. Nureyev loses himself in it, for a moment, caught up in the way their bodies move as a matched set, the determined little frown on Juno's face.

Nureyev pauses. "I'm afraid the lead changes here," he manages, a little breathlessly.

"Damnit," Juno grumbles, but acquiesces, shifting his grip.

His hand rests at the small of Nureyev's back, leading him in the same pattern as before, with a little less confidence this time, fumbling one of the turns and sending Nureyev stumbling into his chest. "Shit, that's my blind side."

Nureyev retreats a step back to their neutral position, keeps his grip on Juno's arm a little tighter than he probably ought, lightheaded from the centrifugal motion. "Dip me," he instructs, when the moment arrives, but he finds he isn't quite recovered enough to be ready for the movement. Juno's hands rest on his waist and then move to catch him as he falters, slipping a little too far and tumbling fully into the Detective's arms as he loses his balance entirely.

And there he stays for another moment, shocked into silence before a burst of laughter escapes him. Juno goes from wide-eyed to grinning in a flash, lifting him easily and spinning him in midair before setting him back on his feet. "Idiot," he accuses, fondly.

He's still dizzy and off-balance, that's the trouble. That's why his hands find purchase on the sides of Juno's face, why he continues to lean forward instead of stepping back again. Still, he thinks Juno is the first to close the distance, pressing his lips to Nureyev's so the tail end of his exhilarated giggle is muffled by a kiss.

He pulls away just as suddenly, and Nureyev's delight turns abruptly sour at the stricken look on his face.

Sasha Wire is going to kill him for that, he thinks, ears ringing.

"Goddamnit," Juno swears. "That was stupid. Robin, I--I'm sorry, *fuck*, I didn't mean--"

Nureyev is all crossed wires, for a moment, tangled so tight in awkward lies and inconvenient truths he feels immobilized by them. He chokes out, "Juno," and stops there, doesn't know the right thing to say. *It's alright, I'm not actually engaged to your brother* doesn't seem likely to put things right, all else being equal.

Juno takes a step back, a shaky breath. "I should go."

He turns on his heel, and Nureyev means to let him. Nureyev means never to see Juno Steel again, for all it will be useless to repair the damage he's done already, only…his comms rings.

Juno stops, a hairsbreadth from the door, coat in hand. Takes out the comms, and groans. "Couldn't have picked a worse time, Mick," he says, flatly.

Nureyev picks up on the tinny echo of his voice over the line, every other word scrambled into white noise, but it's more than easy enough to discern his forcefully cheerful timbre at this distance. Juno's grip goes white-knuckled on the comms.

"--news, buddy! Real good news, don't…miss it, he's awake! Ben's waking up, Jayjay!"

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Benzaiten Steel wakes up.

Chapter Notes

AHAHA fuck! Content warning in the end notes again because Shit Goes Down, you know? Anyway thanks for coming with me on this hijinks journey and consider this: rom-coms are good actually

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Juno ushers him into the passenger seat of his cramped little car and doesn't meet his eyes again, staring straight ahead with his jaw clenched tight and his shoulders drawn high and tense. Nureyev can't decide why he follows, except that there's no explanation he could offer to the contrary that would allow him to keep up the ruse.

A clean break, he had promised himself. Has been promising himself, for the last three days, and failing to deliver on the promise at every turn, like clockwork. His stomach churns, and his fingertips fiddle ceaselessly with the cuffs of his coat, adjusting and readjusting.

The car shudders to a stop in the hospital lot. Nureyev forces his hands to still, and composes himself. He is a professional. He can find a way to spin this.

The room is full by the time they arrive, Sasha and Alessandra Wire and Mick Mercury and Rita all crowded around the bed so its occupant cannot be made out at a glance from the doorway. A picturesque little scene of domesticity.

The instant he and Juno step inside, the change in atmosphere is palpable. A few of the family turn, and a few step aside, and Nureyev finally sets his attention on Benzaiten himself. Propped against a pile of pillows, with the machines around him still whirring and beeping, but alert. A little more color in his cheeks. And a wide, easy smile on his face, until there isn't.

Juno breaks first, stumbling a half-step forward to say, in a stiff, rough voice, "Ben."

Benzaiten is as impenetrable as he had been when Nureyev met him, too cool and casual to reflect the tension apparent in his posture when he replies, “Hey, Juno.” His voice is a little scratchy with disuse. “Thought you said you were getting sick of this kinda scene, Super-Steel.” Nureyev can tell with just a glance how gutted Juno looks at that dismissal, and regrets looking at all.

Then his gaze slides away from Juno and alights on Nureyev, and brightens almost immediately “Robin!” he says, grin spreading ear to ear. “What--”

Nureyev gives a minute shake of his head, and Benzaiten picks up on the gesture in an instant. “Okay, gotcha! Totally expected to see you here, too.”

Mick clears his throat nervously. “How about we all give the lovebirds the room for a minute, huh?”

Benten’s eyebrows shoot up, and he meets Nureyev’s eye as the others turn to wait in the hallway, mouthing *lovebirds* at him with obvious delight.

In another instant, they are entirely alone, and Nureyev realizes, abruptly, that he has no plan whatsoever.

“So,” Benzaiten prompts. “Gonna tell me what all that was about?” He sprawls comfortably back against his mountain of pillows, and rests his chin on one hand. When Nureyev doesn’t respond, a little worry creeps into his expression. “Hey, Robin. C’mon.”

He can find a way to spin this.

Nureyev stirs into motion, plucking a recording device from the vase on the bedside table and a button camera from behind the IV bag and places a paperweight that doubles as a signal disrupter next to the tray of hospital food. The camera he drops in a half-empty glass of water and the recording device he crushes underfoot.

“Damn,” Benten whistles. “What, are you some kind of secret agent, then? Robot assassin?” Nureyev is silent and he crosses his arms over his chest. “Robin, you’re freaking me out here.“

There’s probably a very clever lie he could spin to explain all of this away. Nureyev perches tersely on the edge of the chair closest the bed, and says, “I’m afraid I’ve been quite dishonest with you.”

“That’s not a yes or no on the robot assassin thing.”

“I’m a thief,” he says, succinctly.

Benzaiten doesn’t look particularly askance. “Yeah? Juno and I stole probably half our meals between the ages of eight and eighteen, a little petty theft is pretty standard for us, Robin--”

“Professionally, I mean,” Nureyev clarifies, pride taking precedence over discretion and loosening his tongue. “I came to Hyperion City on a contract, and I’ve very nearly completed it, and I’m not entirely sure how to break it to your family that I am leaving because they are under the impression that we are engaged.”

Benzaiten’s gaze drops to Nureyev’s hands, folded in his lap, and widens a little when he sees the diamond ring gilding his finger. “Oh,” he says, faintly. “Gotta say, I didn’t see that coming, but I can play along! When’s the wedding? What do I call you--honey? Pumpkin?”

Nureyev winces. “That won’t be necessary.” He twists the ring around, then slides it off his finger to sit in his palm. “It’s done,” he says. “I have what I came for, I’ll...I’ll be out of your hair, I only wanted to….”

He frowns. Benten’s gaze is still on him, with that easy half-grin that makes him so inscrutable.

It occurs to him, quite easily now, what it was he felt the urge to confess hours before, lingering in the dark of this same hospital room, alone with his own thoughts. And on a whim, he does it. “I wanted to thank you. I gave up something very important to me, a long time ago, and because of it I have spent a significant portion of my life alone by necessity.” The edges of the stone settings in the ring bite into the skin of his palm. “Perhaps it’s presumptuous of me, but I am. Very grateful for the time I spent pretending to be a part of your family.”

Benten frowns, but his demeanor is still gently teasing when he replies, “That bunch of assholes? Family’s a strong word, don’t you think? I see them as more of a three-ring circus, personally.”

Nureyev laughs, the sound a little choked, and feels his eyes burning behind the rims of his glasses. “Yes, well. They have a strange way of showing it, but they’re very persistent in their affections. Juno--”

He bites his tongue. Benzaiten makes a face. “Oh, tell me you didn’t.”

“We talked,” he says, defensively. “I only mean…it seems to me that your brother cares very deeply for your wellbeing and happiness.”

Benzaiten offers him a tight-lipped smile. “Shouldn’t kill him to tell me that himself,” he says. “But thanks, Robin.”

Nureyev clears his throat, and drops the ring onto a crumpled napkin on the bedside table before he can think to pocket it again. A clean break, he repeats to himself once again. Moves to stand.

“What do I tell them?” Benten asks, casually. “When you walk out of here and disappear to do your lone wolf intergalactic-man-of-mystery thing?”

Nureyev swallows. “Oh, the truth, if you like.” He hesitates, feels the words catch in his craw, and forces them out despite himself. “Tell them I’m sorry. I ought to give them that, at least.”

“Gotcha.” He extends a hand, mock-businesslike, and Nureyev reaches out to shake it. “Do I get to know what you’re here to steal?”

That draws a smile out of him, small and secretive. “Eventually,” he answers, diplomatically as he can.

Benzaiten releases his hand with a sigh. “Cool. *Merde*!”

Robin Argent steps through the door, leaving it ajar in his wake, and makes his departure, paying no heed to the bewildered glances of Benten’s family. An abrupt, wordless exit. He does not look back.

The trick is this: he has no intention of giving Pilot Pereyra access to the microchip schematics he saw in the file. But neither can he simply destroy the evidence and vanish without a trace. There might be any number of copies, backed up onto similar drives or hidden in some more secure location. There are many people who would do a lot for the control a chip like the THEIA Soul might offer.

So the thumb drive, still hanging on the chain wrapped around his wrist, is empty. Wiped clean. The damning files themselves have been copied and uploaded to a secure server, properly encrypted, which he will send to Juno’s secretary’s computer about half an hour before he goes to meet Mx. Pereyra.

It's a risky move, to doublecross the Mayor to their own face. But Nureyev is, after all, in need of a paycheck, and quite confident he can squeeze some collateral from his employer before his indiscretion is discovered, if not the full amount.

The curtain has already risen by the time he reaches the stagedoor, and he can hear the strain of violins through the dark hallways, brushes elbows with half the chorus as they flit between exits and entrances.

The first act comes to a close. Nureyev finds his stolen tablet, and delivers the message, and drops a stage weight on the device until the plasma screen shatters and goes dark. And he goes to the mayor's private box.

Mx. Pereyra has a guard at the door, this time around, two colorful, leather-clad goons who make no pretense of looking at ease in the velvet carpeted hallway. One rests a gloved hand on a ill-concealed blaster as he approaches, and the other picks her teeth with a spiked knuckleduster. "I have an appointment," he informs them, cooly, still standing at a distance.

They look at one another and then give Nureyev a firm once-over. The one with the knuckleduster steps forward. "Weapons at the door."

Nureyev surrenders the twin knives he has most readily available, as well as a stun grenade he finds in one pocket. It doesn't leave him entirely disarmed, but it is an inconvenience, and he risk he would have preferred not to take. But jobs of this caliber come with conditions.

Pilot Pereyra is watching the stage with apparent rapt attention when he steps inside, fingers drumming against the railing in time with the music and the dancers' footwork. Tapping along with the toe of one violently purple stiletto pump.

"Catchy stuff," they say, by way of greeting, and half-turn for a moment to glance at him over the rim of their glasses. "I liked it better when you were early."

Nureyev leans against the back of another chair, glancing over the balcony at the woman twirling another dancer elegantly in her arms. He twists his fingers, lets the chain unwind far enough that the thumb drive dangles visibly from his hand. "I'd hate to waste any more of your valuable time, then, Mx. Mayor."

The shadow of a sideways grin spreads over Pereyra's face. "That's more like it." Their eyes snap to the object in Nureyev's hand, as he lets it catch the light and then pockets it again.

"I'd prefer to see my commission transferred before this leaves my hand," Nureyev says, primly. "You understand."

"Sure." Pereyra leans back in their seat. "But I'd also prefer to get this settled now between just the two of us, instead of calling in one of the ladies outside to speed the deal along. They tend to break bones, they're clumsy like that."

"Sixty percent."

"Forty."

"Half."

"Forty," Pereyra repeats, pointedly. "That's a favor to you. Come on, pal, we both know who's holding all the cards here. Don't get cocky."

Nureyev considers how long it would take to reach the garotte wire wound in the lining of his jacket, and bites back a sigh. "Forty."

Pereyra pulls the contract up on the plasma screen on the face of their watch, "Glad we could work it out," they say, and then, more rote, "I, Mayor Pilot Pereyra, consent to this transaction." They glance back up at Nureyev. "You're still not gonna give me a name?"

"It *is* my only condition," he says, equally rote, but leans in closer. "I consent to this transaction," he agrees.

The first part of the transfer goes through. Nureyev spares a passing thought to mourn the other sixty percent of his profits. There is a time to be mercenary, and there is a time to think of an impact greater than oneself. Preferably in reasonable, sustainable measures.

"There you are, then," he says, and drops the thumb drive into Pereyra's waiting palm. They hold it up to the light, examine the symbol scratched into the surface. They smile wide enough to show all their teeth, asbestos white.

"You seem like a reliable guy," Pilot says, and claps him firmly on the shoulder. Nureyev is watching their face, the sharp edge of their grin and the way the light from the chandelier catches on their half-moon glasses, which is why he's a half-step too slow to flinch away when

they lean forward and sink a knife into his gut. “So rest assured, this is nothing personal.”

Nureyev staggers back a half-step, knees buckling as the pain and adrenaline take hold. He clutches at the handle still protruding from his abdomen.

Pereyra lets him go, watching idly as his back collides with the wall, wiping their hand on their designer sim-leather coat and frowning at the red stain it leaves. “No hard feelings, right? It’s just politics, pal, nobody likes a loose end.”

They shrug in performative helplessness, waiting with enough expectation that Nureyev understands some sort of reply is asked for. He sets his jaw, forces himself to remain upright long enough to provide one. “I suppose I should have seen that coming.”

Apparently satisfied with his answer, Pereyra nods, and tucks the blank thumb drive away, curt and businesslike. “Do me a favor and bleed out quietly, won’t you? I’d hate to see the third act ruined for all these nice people, but I think I’m heading home early tonight.”

The wall does very little to hold Nureyev up with the way the room is starting to spin around him, and he meets the floor without much resistance, eyes level with the sharpened stilettos of Pereyra’s shoes, which click sensibly against the floor as they walk away. He hears the door lock behind them a moment later.

Nureyev takes a shaky breath, braces one arm against the floor to try and push upright, by agonizing, slow degrees.

He has to break the lock. Get past whoever Pereyra left keeping guard on the other side, lay low, keep out of sight, go...go somewhere, somewhere far away before they discover the doublecross and return to finish the job. If the knife in his guts doesn’t finish him first. If he can manage to stand at all.

“Fuck,” Nureyev gasps, softly and with as much feeling as he can muster.

He wonders, frantically, how long he has. Minutes, most likely, and his legs won’t seem to obey him. The best he can do is drag himself a little closer to the balcony railing, try to use that to gain a little leverage.

He wraps his arms around the rail and pulls as hard as he can,

manages to get his feet underneath him while leaning out over the orchestra, in full view of anyone who glances up or away from the stage, trembling with the effort, gritting his teeth to keep himself from making a sound as the pain flares white-hot.

It takes longer than it should, and all that occupies his mind is the sand running through the hourglass, the numbers on the timer he has set for himself falling quicker with every labored breath.

Something collides with the far side of the door, hard, rattling it in its frame. Muffled voices, a sound like a brawl. Nureyev's hand falls to the blade still buried in his abdomen, the closest weapon at hand, and one he knows how to employ, but he stops himself. He'll leave it where it is until he has no other recourse.

Not the door, then. Sideways, over the edge of the balcony, and then climbing carefully across, or up, or down, or….

His legs quiver unsteadily under his weight, and then fold, sending him to his knees with a muffled cry.

Another option. Nureyev is fast running out of options.

There's too much blood, soaking the front of his shirt and staining the velvet carpet, hot and tacky against his skin where he has one arm wrapped around his abdomen. He's rather too lightheaded to stave off the panic any longer, suddenly furious at himself for being outmaneuvered, too preoccupied to see the danger and account for it. What a perfectly *amateurish* spectacle he's made of this.

Nureyev screws his eyes shut and tries, desperately, to reorganize his thoughts through the haze of pain. But they seem inevitably bent on slipping from his grasp, veering headlong into dangerous, sentimental territory.

Perhaps that's why he isn't over surprised to see Juno Steel's face hovering over him like a lovely mirage when his eyes slide open again.

Deciding he might as well accept the hallucination for what it is, Nureyev allows himself a fond smile, and reaches out, quite reasonably expecting his fingers to pass through it, and a little off-put when against all odds he manages to actually grasp at the side of his jaw, fingers fanning over his cheek, rough with stubble.

Juno's expression, too, is not as carefree and joyous as he might have

expected from a frantic firing of his failing synapses. Practically ashen, even, with his brows drawn tightly together and his soft, full lips contorting around frantic repetitions of Robin Argent's name, which he can vaguely hear when he focuses hard enough.

All of which information distills slowly in Nureyev's addled internal landscape to bring him to a new, unforeseen conclusion. "You're really here," he says. "Ah."

Nureyev's fingers are numb and quite uncomfortably cold, but he can just feel Juno's hand close around his own. "Thank fuck," he rasps. "Come on, we gotta...gotta get you out of here."

One conclusion brings him enough clarity to seek another, and Nureyev frowns. "How did you--"

Juno looks abashed but no less fearful, his attention on the stab wound and no longer on Nureyev's face. "Benten said he slipped a tracker up your sleeve, nosy bastard," he explains, distantly. "Told me to chase after you. Assumed I'd be running to stop you at the spaceport, not…*damnit*, Robin, I thought I was too late already."

Nureyev files the information away, for later, if there will be a later. Only what is essential to the moment, he thinks, sharply, through the encroaching fog. "You're very handsome when you're like this," he says, decisively. "Worried about me."

He passes out before he can quite see the face Juno makes in response to that.

The beeping wakes him first. Hospital linens are every bit as scratchy as he remembers, and the smell of antiseptic is overpowering enough that it takes precious seconds longer than usual to orient himself. Nureyev narrows his eyes at the slightly blurry image of the ceiling fan, and blinks, and turns his head to see his glasses resting on the table beside him. One point accounted for.

Stiffness, but no pain, or only a vague echo of it. That's easily accounted for too. He can feel the pressure of bandages around his midsection, and it's almost a certainty he's been recently sedated, by the dryness of his mouth and the pleasant buzzing in his head.

And laughing, too, somewhere nearby. Much more difficult to account for, until he cranes his neck in the opposite direction and sees a second, familiar hospital bed sitting adjacent to his own, scant feet away. Two figures huddled on it, arms wrapped around one another in an awkward half-seated embrace.

“Woah, woah, easy on the spine,” he hears, “backups aren’t cheap.”

“I missed you,” comes the reply, muffled as if spoken into a shoulder. “Shouldn’t have left.”

There’s another burst of laughter, short and sharp. “Already forgave you, didn’t I? Drop it, Lady Raincloud. It’s in the past.” There’s a beat of quiet, and a soft snort. “Hey, don’t look now. Your boy’s awake.”

Nureyev freezes. One figure separates from the other, stumbles awkwardly off the side of the bed and clears his throat. “He was yours first.”

Benzaiten rolls his eyes. “Yeah, well, he’s a grown man, he can make his own choices. Plus, it’d be awkward as hell to explain to Ilse otherwise.”

Nureyev bites down on a smile, and looks away. There’s the distinct slap of a thrown pillow making contact with a shoulder. “You bastard! You seriously weren’t gonna tell me?”

“She’s not even on-planet!” Benten squeaks in protest. “I had to smuggle my goddamn girlfriend to the moon so she wouldn’t get murdered, okay? You can meet her when she gets back! *OOF!* Stop that! Fratricide!”

There’s a brief scuffle, a scandalized grunt from Juno. “You punched me in the boob!”

“Come on, Juno, we’re thirty-eight years old, what are you gonna do? Break my action figure?”

“Thirty-nine,” he interjects, and there’s another beat of silence.

“Ha,” Benten says, softer. “Forgot about that. You didn’t throw a party without me, right?” Juno doesn’t reply, unless he’s pulling some sort of face. “Yeah, I know, it blows, but listen, I’m getting sick of hospital food. We’ll call it a New Year’s thing. You can come, too, Robin,” he announces, firmly.

Nureyev looks back at the direct address to find the pair of them staring at him expectantly. “I...If you want me there, I suppose I can clear my calendar,” he manages, half-surprised by the hoarseness of his voice.

“Gotcha. Name for the invitation?”

The answer catches in his throat. So many years since he’s spoken it aloud. But he’s already trusted the pair of them this far, with so much more of himself than he’s been inclined to give out in decades. “Nureyev,” he manages, shakily. “Peter Nureyev.”

Benzaiten grins. “It suits you.” He stretches, kicks his feet out from under the hospital linens and gestures emphatically toward a cane propped against the wall until Juno places it in his hand. “Well, I think I’m gonna take a walk,” he says, definitively. “See the sights. Maybe check out the gift shop. No rush!”

Juno grits his teeth. “Ben--”

“Later!” he calls over one shoulder, and disappears around a corner.

“Goddamnit,” he hears Juno grumble, under his breath, and braces himself.

It takes him a beat longer than it probably ought to find his voice. “Juno….”

“We should talk, right?” He thrusts his hands into his pockets, reflexively, doesn’t look exactly at Nureyev so much as in his general direction. “About us, I mean. Not just because Ben will twist my arm if I don’t.”

Nureyev feels quite keenly defenseless to the question. “If you like,” he allows, guarded, hoping to steady the immediate uptick of his pulse.

Juno’s countenance falls. “This is stupid,” he groans, and marches closer, throws himself into the chair so his face is finally in plain view. “Listen, I just want to know--that name you gave just now. Is that real?”

“I--” Nureyev grits his teeth, hands fisted in the bedsheets. “It is, yes.”

“What about, uh,” he continues, eye roving over Nureyev’s face like he’s trying to read him from the inside out. “You know. You and me.

The flirting and the, uh, the dancing and….” Juno trails off, red-faced. “Were you just, you know. Having fun? His attention flickers to Nureyev’s lips, just for a moment. “Or was that real too?”

Nureyev swallows, tries to push himself up onto his elbows and doesn’t get far. “Would you mind terribly?” he requests, hesitant.

Juno’s brow furrows, and he leans down to adjust the incline of the bed until Nureyev is propped a little closer to vertical. Nureyev takes his chance, and reaches out to place his hand against the side of Juno’s face, where he remembers placing it before. Juno lets out a soft, surprised huff of a laugh. “Oh,” he says.

Nureyev kisses him, slow and sweet to contrast their last rushed, half-accidental venture. Juno’s fingers comb through his dark hair, and he smiles against his mouth. But it’s only half an answer. Nureyev lets him go with a graze of sharp teeth against his lip that makes Juno gasp. “Real,” he promises, quietly. “Very real.”

That earns him another glimpse of a soft, flickering smile. Juno turns his face, presses his lips to the inside of Nureyev’s wrist, just once, and twines their fingers together. “I have another question.”

Nureyev falls back against the pillows with a sigh. “You and your interrogations,” he groans.

Juno doesn’t rise to the bait, and at a second glance Nureyev can see the hesitation in his face. Afraid he’ll ask too much, perhaps. “Stay?” he asks, plainly.

It’s a very strange thing to recognize that there is nothing he wants more. And yet, not so surprising as the realization that he can have it, if he chooses. Nureyev keeps Juno’s hand held tight in his, and grins. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

Chapter End Notes

Warning: peril, near death experiences, blood and injury and hospitalization again

on a totally separate note I did have an inspo spotify playlist for this fic AGAIN. It's just nureyev "there is nothing and nobody that can shake me now" jams and its here

PODFIC LINK

Chapter Summary

not more fic, just an update!

I just wanted to plug that the PHENOMENAL Jay @onetiredboy recorded a badass podfic version of this fic! It's about 1h50min in runtime and you can find it here: (google drive link)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!